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Chapter 8

Some Psychological Aspects of Religion

IN a study of the relationship between modal personality and culture, the field of religion is one of the most significant because it is often, although not inevitably, one of the areas in which fantasy may be given fullest play. It is also an area where the selection and rejection of diffused traits may manifest themselves with the greatest degree of independence from other determinants like environment, economic production, and technical effectiveness. Ideally a description of life in Atimelang should bring out religious aspects in connection with each of its personal or institutional concomitants, and religion should not be given separate treatment. It has already been apparent that one cannot discuss finances and warfare without including some mention of death ceremonies. A few comments on craftsmanship brought out the casualness that existed in relation to "sacred" carvings, ceremonial procedure, and knowledge of ancestral kin. Passing mention has been made repeatedly of village guardian spirits, of seers, and of garden sacrifices. The autobiographies have many references to familiar spirits and to Good Beings. The object of this chapter is to bring out the Atimelangers' relationship to the supernatural without getting lost in a mass of descriptive detail, which must await fuller treatment in later publications.

DEATH

Since the avowed object of this chapter is to indicate the Atimelanger's relationship to the supernatural, his ideas of the nature of death, of souls, and of the hereafter form a good point of departure. It has long been known that even death, which appears to be an incontrovertible physiologic phenomenon, is subject to a certain amount of leeway in cultural interpretations. A discussion of this point here will lead into bypaths involving trance, insanity, suicide, and attitudes toward illness before it will be possible to move on to the subject of burial and concepts of the soul.

763 At first glance it would seem that the Atimelangers take a thoroughly prosaic view of the matter. When a person is dying, it is customary for one of his grown children, or failing this, some near kinsman like a sibling, to hold the sick person on his lap much as parents hold children. [55] It suggests a reversion *in extremis* to infantile nurturing patterns in the search for which I suspect many men of this culture have spent their lives. In this connection, it is quite remarkable to observe the collapse

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into inertia that accompanies most internal illnesses. A person suffering 758
from headache, cold, influenza, diarrhea, or similar illness will mope
hopelessly in the house and be quite sure he is going to die. Kin usually [755]
rally around the sick person with a good deal of concern, and divinatory
omens are immediately sought. If these are unfavorable — and there is
never any thought of concealing the results from the patient — the de-
pression is naturally heightened. The patient will sit in the dark, smoke-
filled house without bathing, often refusing food, and getting no exercise
or fresh air for days at a time. These factors, particularly when combined
with a depressed state of mind, gave me the impression that it is quite
possible for certain Atimelangers to die with insufficient physical cause.
When the watchers hear the death rattle, they say of the person, "His 763
breath string is broken; already his dying is finished, (*beaking tila sik; inav moni kangri*)." Failing a death rattle, the cessation of heartbeats
and of breathing are also considered criteria of death.

In addition, a prolonged disintegration of normal conscious person-
ality such as occurs in delirium or coma is also considered the equiva-
lent of death. Signs of animation are thought to be simply manifestations
of an evil spirit who has caused the death and has now possessed himself
of the body. There is always a good deal of fear and distaste associated
with such a situation. Under such circumstances the advisable thing to
do is bury the body as expeditiously as possible. As a result people are
occasionally buried whom we would consider still living. At least
two such cases occurred in eighteen months, and Rilpada's autobiog-
raphy gives a singularly matter-of-fact account of a near fate of the
same sort. When this concept was discussed with informants they re-
lated cases of people who still talked, but who were so dead that their
flesh had begun to rot away. From an Atimelanger's point of view this
is quite possible, since sick people never bathe or move from their sleep-
ing mats in the dark and often filthy living rooms. Under such circum-
stances any lesions could rapidly develop into extremely noxious infec-
tions.

The relation of such a concept of death to trance states is worth 756
considering. Among the seers of Atimelang it is assumed that in curing- 158
séances their tutelaries perch on their shoulders and speak through their
mouths. The seer is supposedly unaware of what he is saying. This
might sound like a true trance condition. My observations, however,
lead me to suppose that seers were far from being in deep trances. Their
eyes were open, their movements and speech controlled and coherent,
and their muscular tone normal. Supernatural phenomena seem to be
the result of obvious sleight-of-hand tricks, which appear singularly

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inept when compared to the shamanism of even such marginal areas as California. In other words, despite local theory, I observed nothing that impressed me as real possessionalism.*

There were also in Atimelang certain individuals who had attacks of hyperactivity. One of these was mentioned in connection with obscenity on page 157. Another case was of a woman who began shouting and joking in a loud and apparently compulsive fashion and sometimes accompanied her conversation with a rhythmic jumping up and down. On occasions of this sort people said that their familiars had risen within them (*betimang homin mirang*). This is the same phrase used in connection with seers. Such attacks usually provoke a good deal of amusement among younger people, but older ones are inclined to discourage any teasing or response that might prolong the attack.

Again from observation the attacks of hyperexcitability in these two women in no way suggested trance conditions. Accounts of people considered insane, which will be discussed later, gave no indication that they were in trance states. In other words, I very much doubt that deep trances occur except as rare individual aberrations. They are certainly not induced deliberately nor are they culturally prized. It is quite possible that real trances would be associated with the type of "death" that was thought to occur in delirium and coma, and such an association may have helped to check the introduction of such trances from other cultures. If such is the case, it would also serve to cut down the impressiveness, and therefore the potential power, of seers. Lastly, the danger of losing one's normal personality would seem to offer a possible explanation for the lack of interest shown by Atimelangers in intoxicants. The use of palm wine is known among the coastal peoples, and the requisite palm grows in the mountains; but the mountain peoples do not use it, or even indulge in palm wine during protracted visits to the coast.

It is also interesting that one case of possible suicide, a person who was obviously insane, revolved around this same theme of spirit possession and premature burial. I quote a detailed account for the light it throws on the subject.

The narration referred to an event that occurred about fifteen years ago and began with Fanseni's accidentally offending an evil spirit who lived near his maize field. Some two months later, when the maize was being carried back to his house for storage, signs of abnormality were first noted. Fanseni complained of a violent headache and refused to eat,

* A detailed study of the trance was not made. It is possible, of course, that seers were in a substance. By this I mean that conscious control is not lost, but that an emotional condition exists in which the person deliberately shuts out many external stimuli.

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manic behavior there was much sly humor. In fact, all of these cases were frequently sources of considerable amusement to bystanders.

Probably all these persons were of the manic-depressive type. This psychosis is much more obvious and socially disturbing than certain other mental illnesses, which may account for the emphasis on them. Whether or not the individual's behavior is correctly reported, it is interesting that informants all stress as symptoms of insanity violence, both against people and property, obscenity, and scatologic behavior.

To summarize and to repeat the linkage among all the phenomena so far discussed, we find that spirit possession is associated with hyperexcitability and in its severer forms with manic episodes containing only poorly disguised suicidal impulses, although suicide is not institutionalized. Further, spirit possession in certain types of illness is interpreted as death and leads to the burial of live persons. All these factors may serve to keep toned down the avowedly possessional faculties of seers so that there is considerable doubt about true trance and a general lack of impressiveness in seers' performances, which, in turn, may be factors contributing to their lack of marked social recognition. Lastly, the attitudes and dangers clustering around spirit possession may explain the resistance to intoxicants.

BURIAL

All these digressions lead finally to actual behavior connected with death and burial. When a person dies, the male lineal kin set out immediately to secure the shroud and as many contributions as possible in mokos, gongs, pigs, and food. The shroud will be worn after death by the deceased. This is part of his postmortem prestige, but since cloth is at a premium, this debt will have to be repaid at high interest rates, and around the shroud in future years will center most of the haggling for repayment. Forehanded kinsmen of the proper category see to it that they are prepared with a shroud of high value. Their eyes are on future profit. As a result the best pieces of cloth in the community are being continually put out of circulation. With the onset of death the female kin begin to prepare rice and corn. Not more than one or two women stay near the corpse to wail.

The spouse of the deceased is felt to be in so much danger from the dead that he leaves the immediate vicinity and stands guard with unsheathed knife, to prevent the ghost from carrying him off. For the following night and day he should not sleep. (These precautions are observed by both sexes.) Burial usually occurs not more than twenty-four to thirty-six hours after death, and it is courteous of friends to rush the procedure by urging the family on with comments about the stench of the body.

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159 posed to resemble those of bats.] I told father he had better throw all the cassava away. I was longing for dawn so that we could leave. I said to father, "We had better go back and sleep with mother. We must not sleep here any more." But father did not want to leave. He said I could carry the basket of crabs and crayfish back to mother. I set out. When I came to Talemang, there was a woman who frightened me. She said, "Who are you?" I said, "Is it my name or my father's you do not know?" Then I left her and went on. I met another woman who said, "I am your father's sister, so give me some of your crayfish." I gave her some because I was still small. I came to the middle of the village and it was empty. All the people had gone off to work. Only Alurkomani was there, picking areca. He asked me, "Child, where did you sleep last night, that you are now returning from there?" I told him that an evil spirit had come and that I had been frightened and was going home. I said, "Your younger brother [i.e., Malelaka's father] is guarding the field." I went on. When I reached Tangfei, I heard the people of Alurkowati wailing. I went on to the village, and people said my grandfather, Mangma, was dizzy and people were weeping for him. [Dizziness was [827 considered a bad sign, indicating death and the departure of the soul.] 763 Then I didn't give mother those crayfish and crabs, but went right on into my grandfather's house. When I entered he asked, "Is that Malelaka who has come?" and the people said, "Yes." I gave grandfather the crabs and crayfish. Then he ordered me to fetch my father, but I said that an evil spirit had come to me the night before and I was afraid to go back. So my uncle went to call my father. At this time my grandfather was defecating in his loincloth. He was about to die, but by the time my father came he was coming back to life.

My grandfather recovered. It was time to harvest the rice. We decided to live in Kalmaabui and harvest the field from there. We didn't want to sleep in that field house. My friends from Kalmaabui said to me, "Your mother and father are harvesting rice and you are not helping. You can't sit here doing nothing, so come with us to gather kanari nuts." We went to Wale. We wanted to pick nuts, but we saw they had all been gathered and were piled here and there. Then we saw an old woman asleep wrapped up in her shawl. We didn't know what it was because she was completely covered by it. I called, "Friends, this is an evil spirit that sleeps here." We all ran. One boy took a stone and wanted to throw it at the evil spirit. He said, "Whether it is a human being or an evil spirit, I shall kill it with this stone." Then the old woman woke up and said, "Don't! Don't! I was just scaring you. Don't